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ABSTRACT

This report examines policy issues related to the preparation of educators working with children who are blind or visually impaired. Forty-five state directors of special education were surveyed on the status of personnel serving children with blindness and low vision, recruitment and retention efforts, certification and credentialing, accuracy of "child count" reports, and collaboration for personnel preparation. Results indicate: (1) the majority of respondents place a high priority on personnel shortages of teachers of children with visual impairments, orientation and mobility instructors, and teachers of children with deaf-blindness; (2) only 56 percent of respondents indicated that their efforts to minimize shortages were satisfactory; (3) strategies used to reduce shortages include distance education, stipends for course work, scholarships and tuition reimbursements, prioritization of low incidence personnel preparation, inclusion in state improvement plan/grants, reciprocity agreements, Department of Education support of personnel preparation positions, and collaborative programming and funding activities with institutions of higher education (IHEs); (4) only 44 percent of respondents reported their state has a specialized program to prepare personnel for these positions; (5) the majority of respondents believe that the child count data are accurate; and (6) many states are finding it helpful to collaborate with IHE in combating personnel shortages. (CR)

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Quick Turn Around Forum.
Issue: Blindness and Visual Impairment: Personnel Needs.

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Quick Turn Around

Project FORUM

QTA - a brief analysis of a critical issue in special education

Issue: Blindness and Visual Impairment: Personnel Needs Date: March 1999

Purpose

This QTA is an examination of policy issues related to the preparation of educators who work with children who are blind or visually impaired. Information was obtained from state directors of special education in 45 state and non-state jurisdictions.

Background

The National Plan for Training Personnel (NPTP) project was funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to:

(1) *complete a national needs assessment of factors impacting the appropriate education of infants, toddlers, children and youth with blindness, low vision and deafblindness; and,*

(2) *develop a comprehensive, national strategic plan for preparing capable and qualified personnel to educate infants, toddlers, children, and youth who are blind or have low vision in communities across America.*

In the process of meeting these objectives, NPTP will systematically assess child count discrepancies, and the issues associated with personnel preparation programs for teachers of students who are visually impaired or deafblind, and orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists.

As part of NPTP work on the above objectives, a "Multi-State Sample Study" was conducted in July 1998. The Project staff, along with the Steering Management Committee (SMC) decided that a geographically dispersed sampling of States should be studied in depth. Seventeen states were randomly selected, with each of the 10 federal regions represented by 1 or 2 states. Various demographic statistics were reviewed by NPTP to confirm that the 17 states were representative of the country as a whole.

Within the 17 states, state vision consultants (or the equivalent position), personnel preparation program faculty directors, parent representatives and superintendents of schools for the blind were all targeted to respond to a written survey and/or an in-depth telephone interview. The State Vision Consultants in this *17 State Study* were interviewed on several topics related to the status of personnel serving children with blindness and low vision, and a summary of results by NPTP revealed a number of emerging themes.

Project FORUM Survey

In an effort to enhance the outcomes of two federally-funded projects and reduce redundancy in data collection, Project FORUM at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) collaborated with NPTP to obtain information from state directors of education to

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corroborate the information from the *17 State Study*. This activity was part of Project FORUM's work on its cooperative agreement with OSEP to gain input from state directors of special education on related policy issues and the pressure of competing priorities in education.

This QTA focuses on the perspective of state directors of special education in state and non-state jurisdictions regarding the following issues:

- Status of personnel serving children with blindness and low vision.
- Recruitment and retention efforts.
- Certification and credentialing.
- Accuracy of "Child Count" reports.
- Collaboration for personnel preparation.

These five general issues were identified in the NPTP *17 State Study*, and were incorporated into an eight-item survey that was sent to all states and non-state jurisdictions in late November, 1998. State Directors of Special Education were encouraged to fill out the survey personally, rather than pass it along to the vision specialist in their jurisdictions, in order to obtain the policy perspective desired for this analysis. After a reminder letter in December 1998, 45 responses were received by the end of January, 1999.

The eight-question survey included 18 quantitative data items and 11 qualitative items. The responses and comments were analyzed and compared to the *17 State Study* for consistency across state respondents. Data received from state directors were also examined for the unique policy insight they bring.

Status of Personnel

State directors of special education were asked to rate the priority that they place on the personnel shortages in relationship to the many competing priorities affecting state policy decisions in the following areas:

- Teacher of Visually Impaired (TVI),
- Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Instructor, and
- Teachers of Deaf-Blind (TDB).

Respondents indicated the degree of priority they place on TVI, O&M and TDB shortages with a rating of 1 through 4 (low to high). Thirty-three of the 44 responding states indicated a high priority by circling either a "3" or "4" on the survey scale in all three categories. TVI shortages received the largest number of high priority rankings of "4" with 26 of 44 states highlighting this shortage area. The need for O&M instructors was rated as "3" by 14 respondents and "4" by 20 of 44 respondents. Survey participants rated the TDB shortage with 17 moderately high responses of "3" and 16 high priority responses of "4." Low priority was given to all three categories by 10 different states. TVI received the largest total of "1" responses with 4 of 44 states responding this way. O&M instructors and TDB shortages were ranked "1" on the survey scale by 2 and 3 states respectively.

	TVI (N=44)	O&M (N=44)	TDB (N=44)
low 1	4	2	3
2	6	8	7
2.5	1	1	0
3	7	13	17
4 high	26	20	17

There is no doubt that state directors of special education view the shortages in all positions serving children with blindness and low vision as an important policy issue. The comments

added by the respondents confirmed that they have a clear picture of the personnel needs of their states and non-state jurisdictions, and have considered how the shortages will affect their future staffing needs. For example, one respondent wrote that there are "many vacancies or potential ones" in O&M, and that TDB are "next to impossible to acquire."

Slightly more than half of the 44 respondents put equal priority across the three different personnel positions, whether they considered the shortages a high priority (17 of 23) or low priority (6 of 23). However, 21 states rated the shortages differently depending on the specific position.

Of the 45 state directors who gave their opinion on whether the priority placed on TVI, O&M instructors and TDB is likely to go up, down or remain the same in the near future, nearly 98% (43 of 45) predict that the priority will stay the same or increase within the next 1-3 years. Thirteen states anticipate a rise in priority while 30 predict that the need will remain constant.

When the survey participants were asked to comment on why they thought the situation would change, 17 respondents (or 38%) gave detailed explanations for their answers. The most commonly cited reason for increasing the attention given to the status of TVI, O&M instructors and TDB is that veteran personnel are expected to retire in the next few years. Other respondents felt that the early childhood population was growing (especially among complex disability groups which often include sensory impairment), and the process of identification is improving, which is resulting in more referrals. However, personnel with the specific skills needed to serve children with blindness and low vision are in strong demand. One state wrote, "More teachers in these categories leave us annually than we can replace." Attracting the limited number of graduates to rural areas is a concern for one state, that feels there is "a need to better serve students..."

Recruitment and Retention

The consistent shortage of personnel in low incidence areas, combined with the imminent retirement of a large number of "mature" professionals, has led to a critical demand for states to recruit qualified personnel and hold on to their current staff. The recent emphasis on accountability, and a desire to better serve students, intensifies the need for states to attract the best possible candidates.

Interviews from the *17 State Study* suggested that having an Institution of Higher Education (IHE) program in the state to prepare TVIs, minimizes the shortage of practicing teachers. Although nearly 84% of survey respondents (36 of 43) agreed with these findings, a state with two IHE programs "disagreed strongly," stating that "together [the two programs] produce fewer than a handful" of candidates per year.

Survey respondents suggested a number of reasons why there is still a shortage in states with IHE programs. One participant felt that overall "there are not enough teachers in this area – there is a critical need," and another stated that "we are not doing well recruiting into the profession." Of the seven respondents who disagreed with the impact of an in-state IHE program on reducing shortages, four states had at least one program and still had moderate to high demands for personnel.

There is such a huge nation-wide shortage that qualified teachers, especially those completing graduate degrees with dual certification, can go most any place with their degrees. Therefore, many professionals may take their credentials to more attractive geographic areas or higher paying jobs in other states. On the other hand, individuals who are filling positions while holding emergency licences/certificates may be hesitant to leave

the state for professional development opportunities. Although relocating temporarily could lead to better credentials, many people have families or other commitments and choose not to leave the state. Still, for some states, licensure agreements have ameliorated recruitment problems.

Twenty-three of the 41 responding states (56%) indicate that their efforts to minimize shortages are satisfactory (very adequate or somewhat adequate), while 18 of 41 (44%) suggest a need to take more action in reducing shortages rating efforts as "very inadequate or somewhat inadequate." Only six of 41 respondents believe that the efforts of their states are "very adequate," and even fewer states (3 of 41) fell at the other end of the spectrum rating their endeavors as "very inadequate." Thirty-two states (78%) identify their efforts as average (somewhat adequate or somewhat inadequate).

Among responding states, various strategies are being implemented to reduce shortages. The following responses (in no specific order) came from states that identify their efforts as "adequate" or "very adequate":

- Distance education.
- Stipends to cover the cost of course work for teachers interested in becoming TVI certified.
- Scholarships and tuition reimbursements.
- Prioritization of low incidence personnel preparation through Part D traineeship funds.
- Inclusion in state improvement plan/grants (SIGs).
- Reciprocity agreements.
- Department of Education (DOE) support of IHE personnel preparation position.
- Collaborative programming and funding activities with IHEs.

Several of the states that described their efforts as "inadequate" or "very inadequate" have attempted to address the shortages, but have had mixed results. One state tried to cooperate with a state university but met resistence. Another simply stated that "it is an ongoing struggle to attract TVIs..." Faced with such obstacles, states and non-state jurisdictions do whatever they can to serve their students. This may mean preparing in-service teachers through on-the-job training or relying on personnel programs within the region. Although some states have specific plans for the future (e.g. address through SIGs, redirect resources, develop mentor/apprentice programs) they are not completely comfortable with current efforts.

Some states are using current or proposed Comprehensive Systems of Personnel Development (CSPD) or State Improvement Grants (SIGs) to address the deficit of TVIs. Fifteen (or 35%) are focusing on this problem directly through such funding, 14 (or 33%) are addressing it indirectly through low-incidence activities, and 16 (or 37%) are not using this approach. Two states plan to attack this both directly and indirectly. Of those states with no such plans, one admits that the state does not "have personnel to spearhead such an effort;" yet, another state has made plans and had discussions, but is not currently focused on the issue.

Certification and Credentialing

Since experts do not always agree on which IHE personnel preparation programs qualify as "specialized" preparation programs for TVIs, survey participants were asked if they felt that their states had a specialized program to prepare TVIs, O&M instructors and/or TDBs. Of 43 respondents, slightly less than half (44%) reported that their states had a "specialized" program to prepare personnel for at least one of the positions mentioned.

Almost 56% of respondents (24 of 43) did not feel that there was a "specialized" program in their state or jurisdiction. Although one state (Pennsylvania) offers an undergraduate program for TVI and two graduate programs for O&M and TVI, it is important to note that in some cases the "closest TVI/O&M program is 2,500 miles away!" Moreover, not all of the 24 states that had an IHE program covered all three disciplines. Of the seven states that gave detailed responses about the programs that were offered in their state, three of them clarified that they did not have opportunities for professional development in TVI, O&M, *and* TDB (i.e. TVI program available but no TDB or O&M).

States and non-state jurisdictions are addressing these certification and credentialing issues through a variety of strategies. One state allows licensure endorsement from a university training program and then requires candidates to meet the state certification provisions. External certificates are obtained through the College of Optometry in one state and accepted in another as a way of reducing shortages. While some states offer course work without a formal program, at least two states surveyed are working toward developing a program - albeit slowly according to one account. Addressing the certification issue by offering courses in the summer is a strategy used by one state, but the courses rely on adjunct staff. Situations depending solely on grant-funded projects or adjunct staff may address the immediate problem but prevent self-sustaining programs, according to respondents.

In some cases, the staffing difficulties faced by states seems to have led to creative solutions and increased collaboration. One state has signed a memorandum of agreement with two universities to begin a TVI program in the summer of 1999. Another state anticipates a growth in qualified personnel because of a new program offered in the state, though it is still too early to see results. Also, one respondent reported that an "excellent program..." recently expanded to distance learning.

An increase in such technological applications may bring a significant boost to rural areas. Although rural areas often offer structured technical assistance, "this assistance is not universally available at this time," wrote one respondent. Serving low incidence populations in rural areas is always a challenge, and increased availability of distance learning programs may serve as an important tool for professional development in the future.

Despite the creative solutions to staffing difficulties in some states, there is still a dearth in the number of professionals with the necessary skills to serve students with VI. In some states emergency licenses or certificates for TVIs are used as a temporary remedy for personnel shortages. Hiring a teacher who is taking courses toward certification in the field is often considered an appropriate way to manage the situation. However, these credentials are not always monitored and the temporary substitutes sometimes continue to teach beyond the specified term.

States were asked about the use of emergency credentials in their states. The results revealed that 27 of the 38 responding states (or 71%) employed personnel with emergency licenses/certificates to meet staffing needs. One state that uses such credentials reported that the use was very limited, and another state uses emergency credentials in general but does not allow them in the case of TVI positions. At least two states use temporary licensure that is not specific to TVI, either because the state is non-categorical or has only a general special education license.

When survey participants were asked whether the hiring of personnel with emergency credentials is a positive way to address the shortage, 45% agreed that it depended on the

situation (17 of 38*). Some of the conditions under which states felt it was an "acceptable" response to the situation include:

- The individual is participating in teacher preparation program or credentialing program that leads to license or certification.
- A structured supervision or monitoring program exists.
- Strong support and mentoring are available.
- A skilled professional with ongoing educational commitment agrees to enter VI professional development.

Although 24% (9 of 38*) thought emergency credentialing could serve as a beneficial solution, a greater number -- 34% (or 13 of 38*) -- considered it a negative way to handle the lack of available personnel. One respondent wrote, "what one does in an emergency is not a 'positive' long-term solution". (**note: percentages do not add up to 100% because some respondents indicated more than one answer.*)

Accuracy of "Child Count" Reports

Because a child's visual impairment may be a secondary disability, many experts believe that the unduplicated count causes problems in reporting. Many children have multiple disabilities, one of which is VI, and are reported under "multiply disabled" or are counted according to their primary disability category. The *17 State Study* strongly supports the contention that state "child count" reports to the OSEP undercount children with visual impairments.

State directors were asked if they thought their specific state "child count" data were considered accurate. Nineteen respondents said they believe the state reports misrepresented the actual number of children with blindness or low vision. At least nine respondents agreed that reporting by primary disability leads to undercounting. Others cited examples of conflicting counts among federal reports, resource centers, and American Printing House for the Blind (individuals who are legally blind). States also expressed concerns that rural areas or districts with no TVI may find it difficult to get accurate student data. Additional concerns stated by participants were that "districts count [students] based on primary disability with best funding ratio" and the use of the "developmental delay category" may lead to undercounting of students with VI.

Seventeen state directors, think the "child count" data fairly represents the VI population in their states. Although at least one state admitted that there was a "possibility of some degree of undercounting of students with multiple disabilities," the count was considered "generally accurate." One state reasoned that the data were accurate because they have noted the consistency of the information over the years, and another state verifies the count through both the DOE and region coordinators. Three states did not know whether the "child count" reports in their states are correct, and at least one participant felt that the question was not applicable to non-categorical states where the count is formula driven.

Collaboration for Personnel Preparation

Many SEAs are finding it helpful to collaborate with others in combating personnel shortages. Partnerships between the state and IHE seem to be the most common and beneficial in preparing personnel. In fact, 93% (or 38 of 41) respondents reported working with an in-state or out-of-state college or university program to improve services for students with VI.

At least six SEAs are planning or currently working with IHEs on distance learning endeavors. Other examples of collaborative efforts are:

- Communication and collaboration to ensure qualified personnel are prepared through appropriate professional development.
- Joint planning and/or implementation of projects and programs.
- SEA funding through discretionary grants.
- Formal committee meetings or representative serving on IHE or SEA committee.
- Contracts for vision institutes, VI services or vision endorsement program.
- Negotiations for VI program.
- Professional development opportunities (i.e. teleconferences, distance learning, summer institutes, workshops).
- CSPD Advisory Committee cooperation.

Thirty-three of 39 states (85%) have some kind of interaction with a school for the blind. Although many of the alliances resembled those mentioned above between SEAs and IHEs, there were also some notable differences. Some of the collaborative activities mentioned by states include:

- The state school for the blind is part of the DOE or a division of the DOE.
- Joint strategic planning or development of mission.
- Contracts for CSPD training, data collection or database maintenance.
- Shared professional development opportunities (i.e. conferences and inservice).
- Technical assistance to local education agencies (i.e. assessment, etc.).
- Outreach or provision of instructional materials.
- Co-sponsored projects or personnel.
- Joint coordination efforts.
- SEA monitoring.
- Development of distance learning opportunities.
- Interagency agreements and partnerships.

While a majority of states seem to work closely with schools for the blind on many issues, six (15%) participants reported no collaboration with schools for the blind. Two reasons for this were cited by respondents. One wrote that "all ... students with visual impairments are mainstreamed (or attend sped [sic] in regular schools)." This respondent, and at least three others, reported that there is no school for the blind in the state. However, at least one state collaborates with a school for the blind in another state to provide specialized professional development opportunities. Another state with no school for the blind sends students to an out-of-state school in the same geographic region.

Twenty-two states (about 67%) reported some collaboration with other SEAs. Most of the inter-state collaboration seems to be occurring through the work of Regional Resource Centers (RRC). The Mid-South Regional Resource Center (MSRRC) was credited by three respondents for providing information and opening discussions on issues of VI. The Northeast Regional Resource Center (NERRC) was also cited by two survey participants for doing work in this area. However, of those states reporting alliances with other states, many noted that they generally called on other states to "compare notes on special education services and requirements" or collect information. One participant wrote that state efforts were "not sufficient in this area," and another wrote, "only as needed and with individual states."

Some examples of state partnerships between SEAs include:

- CSPD Regional Committee meetings on a regular basis.
- Planning for regional professional development and credentials.
- Sharing materials and resources.

- Co-sponsored conference.
- Joint program sponsorship.
- Exploring shared distance learning.

One state plans to offer professional development to neighboring states as part of its State Improvement Plan in the future. However, opportunities such as this are inaccessible to states and non-state jurisdictions that are too far away to benefit substantially.

Closing Remarks

Many of the challenges to reducing shortages in personnel serving students with VI mirror those in other low-incidence areas. While small states find it difficult to justify such specialized professional development programs, large states find it difficult to reach all areas of need. States with large rural populations find it difficult enough to accurately account for all students within various disability categories, and are struggling to find the best way to bring quality instruction to their personnel in the interest of students they serve.

Skilled and experienced teachers are in high demand and often move to the most attractive geographical area or district. Many teaching professionals with credentials in TVI, O&M and TDB are expected to retire within the next few years and this will exacerbate an already difficult situation for many states. Considering the wide range of teacher ability, interest, and dedication, states are recognizing the importance of carefully monitoring the use of emergency credentials.

Even states that have IHEs with "specialized" programs in the field of VI are finding it difficult to recruit and retain qualified instructors. Moreover, it is not enough to simply have a program available; it is equally important that the program follow updated standards from the field and provide quality services. Some of the survey comments received would suggest a personnel shortage crisis in the near future (if not already here). However, the imminent crisis could bring opportunity through innovative approaches. Many states consider distance learning a promising strategy for meeting professional development needs.

States are focusing on regional programs, distance learning, and cooperative agreements - such as licensure - to meet low incidence personnel shortages. Many resources and funding sources are being shared to promote better programs and services. Effective communication networks and collaborative partnerships are being built. Low-incidence disability services may benefit most from the careful planning and cooperative project implementation that is expected to result in a comprehensive educational system Many states have high expectations for the development of quality distance learning projects. States specifically mentioned working with seven different IHEs in regard to distance learning: Florida State University, Illinois State University, Michigan State University, Pennsylvania College of Optometry, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, University of Louisville, University of Northern Colorado and Western Michigan State University.

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